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Friday December 23, 2005

PM: We will act

BY SA'ODAH ELIAS AND IAN MCINTYRE



KUALA LUMPUR: Sections of the controversial Islamic family law Bill which the Cabinet has acknowledged as being unfair to Muslim women will be amended.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the Cabinet had decided that amendments to the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) (Amendment) Bill 2005 could still be made to rectify any shortcomings.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

“It does not mean that once a law is enacted, it cannot be amended. We can make suitable changes if necessary,” he

said after visiting flood victims in Kelantan.

The Senate unanimously passed the Bill at 11pm after four hours of debate.

Abdullah acknowledged the fears expressed by some women that the Bill threatened their rights as spouses.

He said there was a need to fine-tune and streamline the Syariah law to ensure equality and justice prevailed.

In Kuala Lumpur, Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Jalil said she met the Prime Minister over the defective Bill yesterday and he had agreed to amend it.

“He also agreed that the Syariah system needed a revamp to reflect the Government’s commitment to ensuring gender equality,” she told reporters at the Parliament lobby.

She said the decision to rush the Bill through despite the acknowledgement that it was defective was to honour the agreement between the Government and the Rulers Council in 2003 when both parties agreed to standardise Syariah laws in the country.

Shahrizat said her ministry had objected to almost all the clauses in the Bill, more than those raised by the NGOs in their memorandum to her.

“The Cabinet is aware of the discriminatory clauses but government protocol when dealing with Malay rulers required that it be passed before amendments could be made.

“As such, the Cabinet had on Aug 17 given conditional approval for the Bill to be tabled. It decided that immediately after it becomes law, the Islamic Development Department (Jakim) must take the necessary steps to amend all discriminatory clauses,” she said.

On Wednesday, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz had threatened to invoke the Whip on 19 Barisan Nasional women senators should they vote against the Bill.

He said this followed talk that some of the women senators might break ranks and vote against it.

Shahrizat said Abdullah had given his commitment to also revamp the Syariah Court system and send its officers for gender sensitisation



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“It is important to stress that Syariah laws are not discriminatory, but those who are responsible in implementing them, including judges who do not respect the spirit of the Syariah laws, are generally at fault,” she said.

“Even when the laws are clearly on the side of women, these implementers, who are mostly men, will always favour the men.

“The uproar over this issue is symptomatic of the real problems affecting Muslim women in the country. Let this be a lesson to all concerned to not trivialise issues involving the rights of women,” she added.

Shahrizat said her ministry would lead a delegation of women leaders to make representations to the Malay Rulers on the pressing need to improve the clauses.



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